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The Gathering Momentum of Mideast Peace

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Suddenly the Arab-Israeli conflict turns from an ostensibly insoluble thousand-year war into a latter-day post-colonial dispute ripe for resolution. All the considerations of history, justice and passion previously cited as insuperable barriers to compromise begin to be cut up into finite pieces capable of intelligent rearrangement. Politicians of the region (some more than others) and diplomats (mainly American) are shrinking the problem to size.

Could not all of this merciful magic have begun earlier? Yes, say those sensitive to the immense human and other costs of the Middle East's wars. But the stronger argument is that the process that began with the Ford and Carter diplomacy of the 1970s could not have picked up the requisite new momentum in the 1990s until conditions made it not only wise and unavoidable but also profitable and safe.

Arabs, especially Palestinians, had to arrive at the view that they had no choice but to accept Israel politically and psychologically and that they could do so, survive and profit. Egypt provided the crucial model: It lost a peacemaker, Anwar Sadat, to anti-Israel terrorism, but stayed essentially on course. Israelis had to realize that, with the United States militarily and politically dominant in the world and with Israel the region's dominant military power, they could start accepting the risks of peace.

What risks? you ask. The Israelis insist they won't surrender an inch of territory. But everyone in the Middle East understands that the Golan Heights will go back to Syria; perhaps at first not to full and direct Syrian control but at least to formal Syrian sovereignty. What it will take are tight assurances of Israeli security and Syrian arrival at an adult definition of peace.

In fact, there's no hurry for a Golan turnover. That's not just because Yitzhak Shamir hangs tough. It's because Hafez Assad shrinks from yielding the claim on power and Arab deference that flows from his chosen role as lead antagonist of Israel. Fortunately, he is no longer in a position, as he was in Lebanon in the 1980s, to spoil a regional initiative. Eventually, this shrewd tyrant may catch on that his policy is anachronistic and self-isolating and that by asserting it as he did at Madrid he loses Arab and international standing. Meanwhile, a nearly two-decade Syrian-Israeli truce holds steady, and Assad's bargaining position deteriorates nicely.

On the West Bank, Israel refuses to budge. The ruling Likud Party's politics locks Shamir in, and after his personal triumph at Madrid the Labor opposition, which accepts territorial compromise, cannot lay a finger on him.

But do not sell short the risk Shamir did take at Madrid. He moved Israel from formal embrace of a program of Palestinian self-government to its active implementation, since now Israel has what it lacked before—a moderate Palestinian partner desperate for real gains. Shamir has done what he said he would not do—set Israel on the slippery slope that leads to a destination he cannot control. It is obvious that, even with the most restricted autonomy, Palestinians will ask for more, and more, and more. Israelis can deal with Palestinian disorder—terrorism, resistance, the intifada. But they cannot ignore Palestinian order of the sort exemplified by the Palestinians' smooth Madrid delegation and by the display of West Bank support for it.

Let us figure—I do—that the autonomy negotiation will be painful but will move ahead. Progress cannot come without Israeli concessions on the place and rate of new settlements. This will be the crucial point where settlements convert from being a lever forcing initial Palestinian concessions to a card that Israel will find it to its advantage to play in return for further Arab concessions on ending the intifada, linking to Jordan, suspending the Arab boycott and extending regional cooperation. Mutual consent will begin to overtake the familiar deadly pattern of one-sided imposition.

In these circumstances, if moderate Palestinians show they are the wave of the Palestinian future, Israelis will not be able to avoid taking a deep and more sympathetic second look at the legitimacy and normality of the Palestinian entity they are helping to create. For them the great lure is the marvelous second chance provided by the Soviet Jewish immigration to restore Israel to its founding purposes as a Jewish state but, this time, as one integrated with the life of its Arab neighbors.